

## **Militant Atheist Objects: Anti-Religion Museums in the Soviet Union**

CRISPIN PAINE

*Institute of Archaeology, UCL*

The 1920s and early '30s saw a complete reorganisation of museums in the Soviet Union. They had a new purpose: to help in the broad education of the masses, and in particular the promotion of a Marxist understanding of history, and support for the Five Year Plan. To effect this new mission museums adopted a completely new approach, involving quite new display techniques and an elaborate programme of outreach. This new museology made possible anti-religious museums, a Soviet invention that for the first time assembled religious artefacts and used them to attack both the institutions of religion and religion itself.

These were real museums, in that they collected and displayed original objects to make their points. Indeed, they adopted a deliberate policy of sacrilege, using icons and the relics of saints to expose the tricks and crimes of the clergy, and to show how religion simply reflects the underlying economic and social conditions and serves the purposes of the ruling class.

“The struggle against religion is...an inseparable component part of the entire ideological activity of party organisations, an essential link and necessary element in the complex of communist education”  
(*Pravda* January 12 1967, quoted in Powell 1975, 1).

### **Introduction**

The 1920s and early '30s saw a complete reorganisation of museums in the Soviet Union. They had a new purpose: to help in the broad education of the masses - and in particular the promotion of a Marxist understanding of history - and to support the Five Year Plan. To effect this new mission museums adopted a completely new approach, involving quite new display techniques and an elaborate programme of outreach. This new museology made possible anti-religious museums, a Soviet invention that for the first time assembled religious artefacts and used them to attack both the institutions of religion and religion itself.

Initially this was by exposing the crimes and tricks of the clergy; later it was also by promoting the rival claims of science, and by showing how religion developed in all parts of the world along with the Marxist phases of social development, and had become a handmaiden of bourgeois capitalism. In all three campaigns *objects* were central - though the new didactic or 'talking museum' approach was universally deployed by anti-religion museums, they all used objects to tell their story. The aim of this short study is to examine the purpose of these new museums, how they delivered that purpose, and how they used these objects to do so.

This is work in progress. This preliminary paper is based almost exclusively on English and French language sources - especially the accounts of left-leaning but critical foreign intellectuals who visited Moscow and St Petersburg during the Soviet era, and who were taken by their guides to see the principal anti-religion museums. Their limitations and prejudices are obvious, but they were at least free to say what they thought and describe what they saw. Much further work is needed to help us understand the origins and changing character of these museums, above all through research in the archives of the former Soviet Union, and through interviews with those who once worked in them.

### **The new museums of the Soviet Union**

The years following the establishment of the Soviet Union saw a massive reorganisation of museums. The nationalisation of private collections, confiscation of palaces and historic houses and closure of monasteries and churches brought a huge increase in the number of museums. In 1918 Russia had 151 museums, in 1923, 390. Whole new categories of museum were developed: museums of the revolution, country-house museums, etc. Collections were reorganised, so that for example the art museums of Leningrad gained modern Western works in exchange for ancient, and the Tretyakov Gallery and Fine Arts Museum acquired outstanding collections.

Most striking, though, was the new purpose that suffused Soviet museums. Museums now had an important role in public education, and a clear responsibility to help workers and peasants understand their history, adopt a scientific outlook, play their part in economic and social development, and develop their taste. Two major policies were pursued: to grow visitor numbers, and to develop services for the public both within the museum and beyond its walls. Visitor numbers increased dramatically, thanks very largely to the policy of attracting organised groups. Groups came from factories and offices, and if these visits for some felt like dragooning, for many they must have been an inspirational break from the relentless grind of work. At first groups were simply led through the galleries, but there soon developed the practice of organising talks, using slides or real objects, around a clear theme. These in turn developed into regular classes for workers and for students, with close liaison between museum and tour organiser or school, and proper training for guides and lecturers. For the individual visitor the old 'take it or leave it' attitude was abandoned: visitor research using questionnaires and tracking tested the visitor's response, and temporary exhibitions were organised to attract repeat visits. The museum, too, sought to go out to the public, and from the late '20s there was a big drive to develop touring exhibitions, which by 1930 were bringing museum services to even remote villages (Anon 1932).

Beneath this new dynamism and energy lay a clear ideological purpose: the inculcation of a Marxist interpretation of history. Historical museums sought to show how the changing means of production brought changing structures of society and the dominance of different classes, a process that was leading inexorably towards communism. Art museums showed how it was not enough simply to enjoy art on an aesthetic level; to understand it one had to recognise how any particular work reflected its economic and class basis.

So there was a new museum service in the Soviet Union with new aims. To serve these new aims, Soviet museums developed a new kind of display, nicknamed 'talking museums' (*samogovorishchie muzei*). This term described the kind of didactic display entirely familiar today - an assertive new style of installation based on graphics. The aim was to transform spaces hitherto reserved for detached aesthetic or spiritual contemplation into exhibitions

in which the untutored worker or peasant visitor could directly learn. No longer were museums simply impressive spaces where individual objects spoke (or not) to the individual visitor, now context was everything: original objects took their place alongside text, charts, reproductions, photographs, models, and dioramas, all organised to tell a story or make a particular point. Adam Jolles (2005) has shown the dramatic effect this approach had in art museums in particular.

No doubt some museums were more energetic than others in implementing all these new approaches, policies and practices, but reading about the new spirit of Soviet museums in the 1920s and '30s is a sharp reminder that a lot of what museums are trying to do today was tried with much success seventy and more years ago. The jargon - 'access', 'diversity', 'contextualisation', 'outreach', 'multi-sensory', 'visitor research' - may be different, but the principles are the same<sup>1</sup>. Our predecessors, too, boasted of the progress they had made since the bad old days. The great difference then from today was that all Soviet museums shared a single clear ideology and mission: the establishment of socialism. One important part of that mission was the drive to destroy religion.

### **The campaign against religion**

Atheist propaganda and the struggle against religion began immediately after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. While social change would, under Marxist theory, bring religion to disappear, Leninists argued that the Party should actively help to eradicate religion as a vital step in creating 'New Soviet Man'. The energy with which the Party struggled against religion, though, varied considerably from time to time and from place to place, as did its hostility to particular faith groups. The 1920s saw the closure of innumerable churches and synagogues (and to a lesser extent mosques) and the active persecution of clergy and harassment of believers. From 1930, though, Stalin introduced a less aggressive approach, and wartime support for the government earned for the Russian Orthodox Church, at least, a level of toleration which lasted until Stalin's death. Under Khrushchev antireligious efforts resumed, if spasmodically, and they lasted until the end of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the Soviet period, direct attacks on religious institutions were just one part of the struggle. Quite as important (and more interesting from our point of view) were the propaganda efforts of the Party. These comprised a range of techniques: public lectures and debates, booklets, films, radio and television, plays, 'houses of atheism' and museums (Struve 1967, 276). The organization the Party created to lead the struggle was *The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*. In his fascinating study, Daniel Perris shows that despite its nominal membership in 1933 of 5.5m (2m more than the Party itself) in fact the League was 'largely a house of cards - a nationwide Potemkin village of atheism' (Perris 1998, 9). More than that, its series of campaigns never really engaged with the promotion of atheism, but concentrated on criticizing and attacking the institutions of belief: clergy, churches and religious holidays. Even there it was ineffective: it was the power of the State, rather than any successful persuasion of the masses, that closed churches, persecuted clergy and abolished the sacred calendar.

The Soviet anti-religion campaign mostly had little to do with 'scientific atheism'. Not least because few cadres had the education to be able to lead such a campaign, most propaganda activity was devoted to exposing the tricks of self-interested clergy, attacking the 'absurdities' of superstition, and contrasting old Holy Russia with the new Soviet society of industrialization, electrification and social justice.

Museums were expected to play their part in the anti-religion campaign, as they were in the wider task of public education and social development. Yury Dombrovsky's delightful satirical novel *The Keeper of Antiquities* shows what it must have been like for many museums. Based on his own experiences working in the 1930s in the National Museum of Kazakhstan, Dombrovsky describes his hero's struggles with the museum's *massovichka*, the official in charge of 'mass scientific enlightenment', or anti-religious propaganda, who clearly felt the museum was not pulling its weight in the anti-religious struggle, and who saw backsliders, if not actual counter-revolutionaries, everywhere. The museum was housed in the former Orthodox Cathedral building, a ramshackle, rambling but resilient structure, which becomes a metaphor for the museum itself, and perhaps also for the Soviet society it served. Dombrovsky paints a sympathetic portrait of the museum's Director, himself for twenty years an anti-religion lecturer in the Red Army, 'exposing priestly magic, cleaning icons and showing how water could be turned into blood', but now finding himself a museum director, determined to ensure that his museum played its part, but also to treat with respect his scholarly and unworldly Keeper.

### **The anti-religion museums**

While all museums played their part, a whole new category of museum came into being to serve the struggle. In the first twenty years of so of the Soviet regime, hundreds of 'Museums of Atheism' were established across the Soviet Union, in public buildings, factories, or in former churches, synagogues and mosques, many of them set up by the *Militant League*. The famous English archaeologist O.G.S. Crawford in 1932 described just such an 'anti-religion room' in a Leningrad House of Culture – a building it shared with a theatre, a crèche, a club for foreign workers, a Civil Defence room and a library.

The anti-religious room is arranged as a museum. Objects and documents (or facsimiles) are exhibited to show the characteristic features of the Russian church before the Revolution, and of existing religious organisations in capitalist countries. The attitude of the Church to war is indicated by a number of photographs showing its close association with the army... "Otherworldliness" is offset by statistics of church profits and the incomes of church dignitaries, and of such profit-making societies as the Salvation Army. The Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury here share the honours of publicity. The late Czar appears in a passive role - as the exploited rather than the exploiter... The museum technique is here applied to the primitive rites and customs of modern Europe. The method is strictly objective, consisting of a display of facts. It is an example of practical Marxian anthropology, which attracts no attention when it is applied to some remote community in the heart of Africa or Australia (Crawford 1933, 22).

Maria Eliseevna Kaulen (2001) has examined this development, and described the struggle between those promoting the preservation of historic churches and their contents through 'museumification', and those who suspected their motives. This struggle was already evident in February 1919 in the first all-Russia museums conference<sup>2</sup>.

Thus two streams came together to form the Soviet anti-religion museums: churches turned into museums by preservationists, and the anti-religion exhibitions of the militant atheists. The former were scarcely more than unused churches, while many of the latter were no

doubt crude and amateurish. By 1929 there were thirty anti-religion museums in the country, the great majority of them former churches (Kaulen 2001, 135). However, in November that year was founded the first such museum of any size and quality. Moscow's Strastnoi (Passion) Monastery, from whose bell tower the police had in 1905 fired on the demonstrators in the square below, became the Central Anti-Religious Museum. Four years later the French writer René Martel reported that its displays were based on the idea that all religions were similar superstitions, which they demonstrated by juxtaposing 'idols, fetishes, Christian images and objects of witchcraft' (Martel 1933, 156), a perhaps rather simplistic analysis of the displays, but a recognition that the new museum was taking a much more sophisticated approach to its mission.

In 1932 the Leningrad Academy of Sciences invited the ethnologist 'Tan' Bogoraz to set up in the great Kazan Cathedral there a Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. This was a big step forward, not least because of the magnificence and fame of the building, and the collections of the existing State Antireligious Museum in St Isaac's Cathedral were soon transferred to the new museum. It put anti-religious museums on a completely new level. It must have been partly because of the realization of just how embarrassingly crude many of the earlier ones were, as well as of Stalin's wartime rapprochement with the Russian Orthodox Church, that in 1941 all but a handful of antireligious museums were either closed or changed into ordinary historical museums (Struve, 1967, 279).

The Moscow museum's Strastnoi Monastery building had been demolished in 1936 - whether the museum moved elsewhere is not clear, for the museum itself seems to have closed only in 1947, when its director Bonch-Bruevich was poached by the Kazanski Leningrad museum. Under his leadership the latter greatly expanded its activities, not least because Bonch-Bruevich brought with him the entire collections of the Moscow museum. 'Restoration work began to repair the damage done by German artillery and aircraft during the second World War and a manuscript division was added to the museum's library. Bonch-Bruevich initiated a publication series, stimulated research and educational work on the subject of atheism, and secured additional facilities for the use of the museum. [He] thwarted repeated attempts to have the Museum closed in his last years "when scientific-atheistic propaganda was neglected"' (Elliott 1983, 124).

As we shall see from descriptions by visitors, the emphases of the anti-religion museum displays developed over the years. However, three themes ran through them all: exposing the tricks and crimes of the clergy, opposing science to the superstition of religion, and showing how the growth of religion reflected the underlying economic base. We shall see too, that for all they were 'talking museums', using a wide variety of media to tell their stories, they remained true to their calling as museums, collecting, caring for and presenting original objects. The anti-religion museums were always distinct from the mere graphic exhibitions so frequently organised by the *Militant League*.

### **The role of objects: from sacred to sacrilege**

One of the most striking aspects of Soviet museology in these years was its continued emphasis on objects. Museums pride themselves on collecting, caring for and presenting original objects, arguing that 'the real thing' has a power to communicate that is denied to even the finest replica. Though they had a new didactic purpose and had adopted a new museological technique to deliver it, Soviet museums were far from abandoning their calling as museums, but continued to collect and display objects. For all the use the new approach to

exhibition made of text, diagrams, models, dioramas and so on to help convey their message and to give context to the objects, yet it was original objects that were at the core of the new Soviet museums.

In art museums, though, their meaning was radically changed. No longer were viewers invited to contemplate, in reverential silence, great 'works of art' and thus to raise their moral tone and improve their character. Such object fetishism could not survive an understanding of how art was always the product of its social class, and the most admired art was that produced by the dominant class of the time. The great art galleries were reorganised to reflect this understanding, and exhibitions were arranged that used works of art in an ensemble along with a variety of other media, to make their point - and in the process reduced their status to that of any other museum object, the merchant's oil painting shown alongside the peasant's painted distaff.

Even the most radical art museum curators, though, had their limits - or perhaps they melted over the years. Here is Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, writing in *The Soviet Art Museum* in 1933:

The museum fuddy-duddies made fun of the ensemble and deliberately distorted the idea behind it. They accused us of trying to kill painting, destroy art. They claimed that we want to hang engravings rather than paintings in museums, to set up beds and washstands and such like nonsense. [This was] the only way we could reveal and convincingly show the unity of a class's artistic ideology at a given stage in the class struggle...

But by the late 1920s the job was largely done:

The low whisper of the "academic" installation was replaced by the loud voice of the agitator...we had already learned much more about how to reveal the class essence of particular styles without having to fight against the art and diminish its objective artistic qualities.... we have never rejected beauty or pleasure per se (Fedorov-Davydov 2002).

So not all objects were reduced to their function as evidence; objects could still give pleasure through their beauty alone.

The struggles within the world of art museums revealed here is paralleled by those in ethnographic museums described by Francine Hirsch in her account (2005, 187-227) of the Ethnographic Department of the State Russian Museum in the late 1920s - early 1930s. There too staff struggled to find a way to show the lives of the various peoples of the Soviet Union that would toe the Party line. Indeed, their task was more difficult both because it related directly to the government's policy towards its provinces and their minority communities, and because ethnographic exhibits were expensive and time-consuming to change. There, however, the *meaning* of the objects was not changed; they remained essentially evidence of how their makers, owners and users lived. The change was in how the social and economic role and relationships of those makers, owners and users were understood.

In the anti-religion museums, on the other hand, objects were taking on a dramatically different meaning. Why did the anti-religion museums use original objects? Could not their

message that there is no God, and that continuing with such a foolish superstition simply holds back human progress, be equally well (and much more cheaply) presented using just graphics and text? Religious objects could be consigned to the bonfire with much greater public impact; this was the course taken at the English Reformation, for example. Instead, these new museums discovered a new function for objects; they discovered how to neuter objects - how to make objects, too, serve the purpose of communism.

### **The shocking object**

The first and most dramatic way in which objects were deployed in these museums, a way unique to them, involved the deliberate deployment of sacrilege. Sacrilege is the misuse of holy things, and when deliberate can be seen as an act of aggression, often indeed it is almost an act of revolutionary violence. Most consideration of sacrilege (blasphemy) in modern societies has been concerned with artists and others attacking through their work a power structure, whether the religious or the secular establishment, and with the counter-action of believers or of the State (Plate n.d). In the latter case we speak of censorship. But in the Soviet Union the situation was more ambiguous: who was the aggressor? Who was committing the sacrilege, who was the censor?

In the past generation, museums in the West have realised that objects have lives beyond the purely material, and have looked for ways to preserve not just the object's physical form, but its 'spiritual' aspects. Thus they avoid any conservation technique that might be considered to poison the object, they display it respectfully, they limit the groups of people who may touch or see it, they allow those to whom it is significant to perform rites in its honour. Soviet museums took exactly the opposite position. They deliberately denied the object any meaning but the physical, crediting it only with aesthetic and evidential ('scientific') value<sup>3</sup>. Quite deliberately they committed sacrilege, as a means of challenging the 'superstitions' of visitors, as a step to altering their consciousness. Like the breaking of any taboo, deliberately to use an object previously used for a religious purpose is provocative - intended quite deliberately to cause shock and offence. Here it was the State, or at best the *Militant League*, which was deliberately taking religious objects and holding them up to ridicule and derision, in order to break their emotive power and to change their meaning.

Meaning could be changed, too, in a way that looks at first quite gentle and sympathetic, but in reality was often equally violent to the beliefs and feelings of believers. As we have seen, innumerable works of art were seized from closed monasteries and churches and placed in art galleries. For believers, any such seizure of Church property was sacrilege, but the treatment of a sacred icon as a mere 'work of art' was particularly blasphemous. It was replacing a window into heaven with a skilled assemblage of paint and wood.

One of the earliest emphases of the anti-religion campaign was the attack on the saints. In museums, this mainly took the form of explaining away the preservation of relics, and the exposure of miracle-working icons. If one wants convincingly to show that a relic or an icon is a fraud, one needs to show the original. Henry VIII's Commissioners understood that when they organised a demonstration of how the "miraculous" Boxley Rood of Grace (a wooden image of Christ on the cross) could be made to move its eyes and lips thanks to a series of levers (Finucane 1977, 208). The anti-religion museums took exactly the same approach, exposing the hidden workings of a 'miraculous' icon, and explaining the process of natural mummification. 'Sacred' things are fakes at worst, powerless at best.

Bodies of the saints, for centuries venerated in the monasteries of Kiev and Moscow, were torn from their tombs and publicly exhibited:

Doctors and agitators were stationed by the almost carbonized and mummified bodies of the saints to give scientific lectures to the spectators on the reason why these bodies had not putrefied. "If a dead body is placed in a dry airy space," they explained to the gaping crowd, "the bacteria of decay cannot develop, decomposition is arrested, and the corpse dies up. If a mummy of this kind falls into the hands of the priests, it is immediately declared to be the relics of a saint. If a dried body of this kind is not forthcoming naturally, then you need only sufficient skill, a few pounds of cotton wool, and the skull of any dead person you like, and in a trice you can manufacture relics." (Fülöp-Miller 1927, 187).

This was in the Museum of National Hygiene in 1927, but the Moscow anti-religious museum had similar displays a decade later (Powell 1975). The French socialist travel writer Francois Drujon describes it in 1935:

In the main hall, a crowd of workers, peasants and children surround a comrade leading a tour. He shows them an old painting representing the Virgin Mary. It is the Virgin crying. "It is a miraculous Virgin", he says, "because it cries when you look at it." At this moment the guide passes behind the wall and the Virgin begins to cry. He then asks the visitors to step behind the painting, where they see a small bucket of water, a siphon, and a rubber ball. "Here is how miracles are made", he cries. (translated in Jolles, 2005).

### **The contribution of anthropology**

To neuter an object and render it harmless, place it in a context that voids it of power. The Soviet museums had a great advantage over their English Reformation or French Revolution predecessors: the power of 'comparative religion'. Both the Moscow museum and the Leningrad museum used comparative displays of religious objects to show that religion was all one and all a delusion. Juxtaposing icons, crosses and statues of saints with Babylonian, African or South Sea images and totems (White 1930, 73) at once neutered them, changing their meaning from sacred objects to harmless museum objects, 'religious' objects that merely illustrated a passing phase in human evolution. People who had laughed at exotic objects from 'primitive' societies were being invited to see objects from their own culture as exactly the same.

In this way anthropological research was directly able to serve the anti-religious cause, and able to do so in a way that appealed most to the more sophisticated visitor. We have here an alliance between a scholarly interest in the history and anthropology of religion and anti-religion; the great collections built up by Soviet ethnographers served both aims. They promoted museum research in order to understand how religion had developed - what exactly it was that made people adopt irrational and reactionary beliefs and practices. The two greatest of these scholars were Vladimir Germanovich Bogoraz and Vlademir Dmitrievich Bonch-Bruevich. Both were early revolutionaries and active Party members; between them they developed the two great Museums of Atheism: those of Moscow and Leningrad.

Vladimir Germanovich ('Tan') Bogoraz (1865-1936) was an early member of the People's Will party, frequently in prison or on the run from the Tsarist police. Exile in Siberia encouraged him to study the local Russian Cossacks and other ethnic groups, and he soon became a respected anthropologist as well as a poet and writer. In 1900 he joined an American expedition to northeast Siberia (travelling via New York and returning via Japan), where he spent 18 months and collected 4,500 specimens. He remained a revolutionary, often in prison, until the revolution, after which he became an academic ethnographer. In 1930 he founded the *League of the Militant Godless*, and two years later the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism; he remained its director until his death in 1936 (Gernet and Wolf 2003, 198-205).

Vladimir Dmitrievich Bonch-Bruевич (1873-1955) was an old Bolshevik revolutionary, fought in both the 1905 and 1917 risings in St Petersburg, helped set up the Soviet government and was a close friend of Lenin, working in the next-door office in the Kremlin. But he was also a serious ethnologist and historian, and a specialist in Russian minority religions – he spent a year in 1899 with the Dukhobour emigrants to Canada and published their hymns. (Incidentally, he was also a lifelong admirer of Tolstoy, and edited his works). In 1933 he became Director of the State Literary Museum, and in 1946 of the Central Anti-religious Museum in Moscow. The following year that museum was closed, and the thousands of exhibits and the 80,000 volume library were moved to the Leningrad museum. Bonch-Bruевич became the new Director, and remained there until his death in 1955.

Throver (1983, 245) points out that Soviet ethnography was dominated by men who received their training before they became Marxists, and well before Marx's early writings on religion were published. This was perhaps important in creating a fairly open atmosphere in ethnographic research, not least within the Leningrad museum.

An early French visitor to both the Moscow and the Leningrad museum was the writer on European affairs René Martel. Martel saw the Moscow museum as principally aimed at the masses while the Leningrad museum was targeted at a much more intellectual audience, and was trying to create an elite cadre seriously well-informed in the field (Martel 1933, 159). In its displays, Martel presents the Kazanski Leningrad museum as trying to show through its material culture - amulets, fetishes, Vodou *gris-gris*, icons, scapulars, medals - how religion developed, and how little these religious objects had changed from their most primitive forms. Martel was particularly impressed by the museum's use of ancillary sciences like numismatics to unfold its story (Martel 1933, 158). (Not all French visitors were so impressed, though. Marc Chadourne had also visited just after the museum opened, and commented (1932, 97) '...one can see in the transept a very thin assortment of fetishes, costumes, cult objects of witchcraft which reunited the Egyptian ibis with rubbish pottery. Was this an ethnographic museum of religion? Lovers of flea-markets could get nothing out of it.')

We need perhaps (as often in museums) to distinguish between the museum's permanent displays and its programme of activities and research. Bonch-Bruевич was also head of the Moscow Academy of Sciences, and clearly took very seriously his national role. In 1953 he wrote to Khrushchev: "The tasks of the struggle with religious survivals have not disappeared. In order to propagandise properly the questions connected with this, it is necessary to study these questions scientifically" (Corley 1996, 186). In 1950 he initiated the museum's annual scholarly Yearbook, which was replaced only in 1964 when the study of religion and atheism was reorganised under a new institute within the Academy of Social Sciences

(Thrower 1983, 147). Nowadays, when the museum has become the Museum of the History of Religion and its former home in St Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral has been returned to the Church, the museum naturally likes to emphasise its history as a highly-respected centre for scholarly research into religion (Kautchinsky 2005).

### **The attack on the Church**

Anti-religious museums pursued another of the major themes of the anti-religion movement, the attack on the clergy as corrupt, wealthy, and anti-revolutionary. The Moscow museum dioramas showed, for example, a priest hearing a peasant's confession, and then accepting a policeman's bribe as the peasant is arrested. Graphics contrasted the enormous wealth of the Russian Orthodox Church with the terrible distress of the oppressed peasantry. Museum guides described to visiting groups the life of the lords of the Church, and of bloody monks from the provocateur Father Gapon of the 1905 Revolution to the drunken lecher Rasputin (Martel 1933, 156-158).

An important theme at Leningrad ('very methodically presented' according to Martel) was the role of religion in past and present, which included a section on religion and the Great War, as well as paintings caricaturing religion. A third theme covered the links between religion and the intellectual elite: the general crisis of capitalism, the Paris Commune and proletarian atheism, religion and the workers' movement, and the international atheism movement. He noted numerous caricatures by Soviet artists, for example mocking the 'nep-men' (profiteers of Lenin's New Economic Policy), satirizing the Bible and exposing the class basis of religion.

The anti-religious museums tried deliberately to link religious belief with lack of patriotism. Every effort was made to show how the clergy were aligned with both Tsarist counter-revolutionaries and foreign invaders. The St Isaac's Leningrad museum included several caricatures of the Pope, 'one representing him as standing beside cannon which imaginary foreign interventionists were supposed to turn against the Soviet Union' (Chamberlin 1935, 314).

For all its comparative sophistication, the American writer Marcus Bach in the late 1950s described the Kazanski Leningrad museum's harsh portrayal of religion, with a special emphasis on its cruelty. There was the painting of Christ the oppressor, Christ the driver of the Horses of the Apocalypse grinding people under their hooves, and Christ the Jewish Fortune-teller.

I went down into a lower level to see the part played by the Inquisition, to gaze at religion's torture chambers and religion's instruments of terror...I walked around viewing scenes from other bloody chapters in the frightful fable of faith: horror scenes from the Thirty Years War, obscenities from the period of the Reformation, torture practices of the Counter-Reformation...I paused transfixed before...iron shackles, iron chains, hair shirts, [and] iron crosses with ball and chain (Bach 1958 quoted in Elliott 1983, 125).

In 1967 there was still an emphasis on Roman Catholic and Western church nastiness. 90 'stands' were devoted to the history of the Papacy and of the Inquisition, but only 57 devoted to the history of Orthodoxy and Russian Atheism (Struve 1967, 280). This curious imbalance presumably reflected Cold War politics.

In 1974 the American Methodist academic Mark Elliott reported the displays as organised around eight subjects: Science and Religion, the Origins of Religion, Religion and Atheism in the Ancient World, religions of the East, the Origins of Christianity, Religion and Atheism in the West, History of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Atheism, and the Overcoming of Religious Survivals in the Period of the Large-Scale Construction of Communism in the USSR. It was still aggressive: 'The former cathedral had become a storehouse of an assortment of branding irons, thumbscrews, whips and similar instruments of the Inquisition; supplementing the collection were unsubtle paintings of pompous, grotesquely formed clerics; and dioramas of heretics burning at the stake' (Elliott 1983).

Going back seven years later, Elliott found crowds of Russians visiting 'radically reworked' displays. His diary noted 'The contrast between the 1974 exhibit and today's is dramatic. No whips, thumbscrews etc. The approach is now much less obnoxious, [and less] blatant.' Religion was still condemned 'but in a relatively restrained, sophisticated, subtle way. There are anti-religious quotes from Engels, Marx and Lenin but the appearance of the exhibits is closer to refined instructional propaganda than to the harangue of 1974'. He noted three prominent themes: Russian sectarianism, Russian Orthodoxy and West European deism and atheism. There was still a large statue of Lenin.

### **Science overcomes religion**

A particular theme of the anti-religion campaign was the idea that science had disproved and was rapidly replacing religion. In presenting this argument objects were used much less. André Gide saw this as the main message of the St Isaac's Leningrad museum:

The museum itself is much less impertinent than I had feared. It works by setting up science against religion. Museum guides take on the role of helping those lazy souls whom the various optical instruments, or pictures of astronomy, natural history, anatomy or statistics, will not be enough to convince (Gide 1936, 104).

The Moscow museum included lengthy and detailed displays of comparative embryology and anatomy 'with everything plainly labelled in simple language and guides nearby to explain' (White 1930, 73).

One of the main features of the St Isaac's Leningrad museum was a Foucault's Pendulum suspended from the great dome, to demonstrate the rotation of the earth. First shown in 1931, the display included drawings explaining its principle, materials on the history of the experiment, and tables with mathematical calculations - and a large painting showing 'Galileo Before the Roman Inquisition'.

Of course, there were many science museums in the Soviet Union; some were in former churches, and probably all saw themselves as part of the anti-religion struggle. In Riga, Latvia, the Orthodox cathedral was used as the headquarters of a Science Association, with a planetarium in the dome. The Association organized regular lectures, including on atheism. 'They invited museum specialists to give the lectures, and I, for instance, talked about dinosaurs to school children before the moving picture show'<sup>4</sup>. With independence, the cathedral was returned to the Orthodox Church.

## The response of visitors

So how did the visitor to the anti-religion museums react to what they saw? Two French scientists, who visited the Moscow museum with their interpreter in 1934, give a useful account. They showed how the displays presented a history of religion, leading into an attack on its recent and continuing reactionary role (Appendix). Their description suggests the museum was making a real effort to present a Red understanding of the role of religion in human society, and to do so using real objects as well as pictures and text. Most foreign visitors however, even the most sympathetic, tended to find the anti-religion museums naïve and embarrassing, and in Leningrad some saw the contrast between the magnificent cathedrals and the sad displays inserted into them as depressing.

But Soviet visitors flocked to these new museums in astonishing numbers. In 1930 the president of the *League of the Militant Godless* was boasting that the Moscow museum had attracted a quarter of a million people in its first year - as many as had visited the famous Tretyakov Gallery (quoted in Jolles 2005, 432). The Leningrad museum attracted 257,000 visitors in 1956; by 1983 this had grown to over 700,000. Much of this was achieved by organised group tours; in 1960 museum workers averaged nearly seventeen guided tours daily. This seems indeed to have been the main way in which museum-visiting took place: '...workers from a factory or employees from an office visit together, in a systematic way...' (Prof. S. Bezsanov, quoted in Anon 1932, 152).

Outreach effort was equally impressive, and activities apparently included lecturing on atheism in schools, factories and cultural organisations, setting up provincial 'atheism houses' and clubs, the training of atheist propagandists, and the creation of touring exhibitions - as well as the usual research and publication. (Mind, some visitors reported seeing women venerating icons in the museum) (Thrower 1983, 329). In the 1930s a museum workshop supplied reproduction exhibits to other museums, and organized touring exhibitions 'which toured the whole country and reached the remotest villages' (Martel 1933, 160).

## Museums of Atheism elsewhere

This interim study has concentrated almost entirely on the museums in Moscow and Leningrad; information is not readily available about other museums of atheism in the old Soviet bloc. One of the most significant, at least in terms of its collections, must have been the Petchersk monastery in Kiev, one of the oldest and richest of monasteries, which had played a significant role in the Ukrainian national movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and later. Its fabulous treasury was preserved in the Church of All Saints, a museum of textiles created in the Metropolitan's house, and the Cathedral of the Assumption and the famous catacombs preserved. For Martel, almost more significant were the finds it displayed from excavations of Phoenician sites in southern Ukraine: 'besides, one sometimes has the impression that it's a general historian rather than a specialist in religions who has organized these extraordinary sections' (Martel 1933, 160). Atheist museums elsewhere included a former Dominican church in Lviv, Ukraine, a former Jesuit church in Vilnius, Lithuania (but both formerly Poland), and the former shrine of the Sufi saint Baha al-Din al-Naqshbandi, Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

## The end of Museums of Atheism

All it seems are now gone, their buildings once more places of worship. With the collapse of the Soviet Union museums of atheism disappeared. Sadly, we know nothing of this process; research might reveal whether indeed all that effort by dedicated curators went for nothing. Has there really been no resistance by atheists to the destruction of their 'sacred places'? Although militant atheism is still very much around - indeed much revived - it seems the atheist museum is for the present no more.

Leningrad's Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism has become St Petersburg's Museum of the History of Religion. As such it remains a highly-respected institution, one of the world's leading museums of religion. Its atheism collections are preserved, but now they illustrate just one more stage in humankind's continual search for meaning (Koutchinsky 2005).

## Appendix

Two French scientists visit Moscow's Museum of Atheism in 1934:

First of all we are shown the evolution of religion through the centuries. First primitive cave-man, where there is already a certain amount of specialisation; pictures showing the hunting of mammoths, bears and wild animals. There is still no religion, but the demands of work mean that the oldest people are favoured. Then comes the beginning of religion, belief in the Spirit. A time of more civilisation appears, with changing social conditions; beliefs change too. Australians hunt, work is divided according to sex, but men are still privileged. Belief is placed only in certain animals. Further on a scene 'religion hindering work', 'society in Egypt', 'the construction of the Pyramids', 'the exploitation of slaves'. Belief rejects the supernatural character attributed to animals, there is a whole series of Gods, and with a quite childish naivety our interpreter tells us 'Each God has his job: God of the spirit, God of light, God of war... Here', she says, 'is the period when one must believe in life after death, the existence of the soul; the dead (mummies) are preserved but the slaves are enchained.' Superb mummies and a 'judgement of Osiris' figure among a very fine collection of different objects. The storm breaks, we are at the slave revolt under Nero, two thousand subjects are crucified.

It is in the Roman period that 'Religion' is truly born; the Virgin appears, But, added our cicerone, the cross was already known, "we know it was the sign of fire". Christ and the creation of hell for sinners, of purgatory for the less guilty, of heaven for the pure.'

The Muslim religion takes shape (Allah!). The Holy Book, the Qur'an, is its basis, and gives rules to meditate on and follow - the pilgrimage to Mecca. We stop a moment in front of a superb decorated Bible (Gospels).

Here are the Middle Ages with the Inquisition, the trial of heretics. Unbelievers are burnt.

Synagogues, Jewish temples, equally furnish an example of a different religion. For a long time Jews were persecuted in Russia; they could only live in small provincial towns, yet they 'upheld the Tsar' and their emblem showed 'The Tsar chief'.

Here now the shops of religious objects. A priest selling the tears of St Magdalene, the blood of Christ, bits of wood from the 'Cross of Christ'. a collection of ex-votos of every kind (slings, shirts etc...)

The different means of 'profit' for religion are shown here: collection boxes, plates, urns, the prayer wheel (the more one pays, the greater the blessing), the relics of St Seraphim found in 1902.

The role of missionaries in the colonies, the military forces that obliged the blacks to submit, a Negro carrying a capitalist drinking whisky. These are the subjects represented in this room.

Beside a little portable church, the gift of a very rich bourgeois, a picture showing a priest talking to a soldier who kisses his hand and begs him to defend the Tsar.

"To win the war", remarked their interpreter, "required miracles. So patriarchs, metropolitans and priests distributed 'holy images' throughout the army."

Here is the period of Rasputin, with original letters in his handwriting. But the 1917 Revolution has just broken out. We see pictures showing the first conferences of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky.

The clergy remain entirely faithful to the Tsar; there are images of the triumphant White army, the communists who 'go to hell', and two miracle-working religious skeletons (saints).

A painting shows how religion is harmful to the peasantry - an organ of barbarism, a bird which carries a letter from the Virgin saying 'You must not enter the economic collective'; a picture showing a Russian subject, belonging to a religious sect, heavily armed and fighting the Revolutionaries. There representatives of another sect, 'the Red Dragons', who defended the Tsarist regime, masked enemies who fought against the anti-Tsarists.

Little by little the people reject the whole idea of religion, the icons are burnt, atheists increase in the countryside. The Church becomes a club for the peasants.

Here is a statue of Galileo in chains, Giordano Bruno martyred, scholars thrown into prison or executed, all because the priests see them as redoubtable enemies. A panel shows the degeneration of bourgeois culture (appearance of spiritualism).

As they left the museum, their interpreter remarked 'We, gentlemen,

prefer to put our trust in Science. You can see what the new Russia has achieved in Science: medicine, chemistry, physics, biology, stratosphere, aviation, industry. We don't need religion to accomplish miracles.' (Sartory and Bailly 1935, 187).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers of this paper pointed out the difference between the one-way communication practiced by Soviet museums, and contemporary efforts to establish genuine interaction between museum and public.
- <sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Gaigysyz Jorayev of UCL's Institute of Archaeology for summarising this book for me.
- <sup>3</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers of this paper pointed out 'that the Soviet museums were actually pioneering the idea that objects have biographies: demonstrating that an icon created to evoke awe and obedience can have successive lives as a bourgeois commodity and as an item of 'scientific evidence' of the falsity of superstition.'
- <sup>4</sup> Anita Jirgenson, Latvian Ministry of Culture, pers. com.

## References

- Anon** 1932 'L'Orientation Nouvelle et la Réorganisation des Musées dans la Russie Soviétique', *Mouseion* 19, 3, 150-159.
- Bach, M** 1958 *God and the Soviets*. New York, Crowell.
- Corley, F** 1996 *Religion in the Soviet Union: an Archival Reader*. Basingstoke, Macmillan.
- Chadourne, M** 1932 *l'U.R.S.S. Sans Passion*. Paris, Editions Mornay.
- Chamberlin, W H** 1935 *Russia's Iron Age*. London, Duckworth.
- Crawford, O G S** 1933 *A Tour in Bolshevy*. Typescript, Sackler Library Oxford, 580 C.124 Archives.
- Dombrovsky, Y** 1991 *The Keeper of Antiquities*. London, Harvill.
- Dominov, M S** n.d. *St Isaac's Cathedral: History of the Museum*. <http://eng.cathedral.ru/museum/history>. Accessed January 2009.
- Elliott, M** 1981 'Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism' in J L Wieczynski (ed.). *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*. Vol. 23. Academic International Press.
- Elliott, M** 1983 'The Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism'. *Religion in Communist Lands*. Vol. 11, No. 2.
- Federov-Davydov, A** 2005 'The Soviet Art Museum 1933'. *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*. Vol. 5 No. 1.
- Finucane, R C** 1977 *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*. London, Dent.
- Fülöp-Miller, R** 1927 *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism: an Examination of Cultural Life in Soviet Russia*. London, G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Gernet, K** and **Wolf, M** 2003 'Bogoraz, Vladimir Germanovich' in B F Adams (ed.) *The Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian, Soviet and Eurasian History*. Vol. 4. Academic International Press.
- Gide, A** 1936 *Back from the U.S.S.R.* London, Martin Secker and Warburg.
- Gramont, E de** 1933 *Le Chemin de l'U.R.S.S.* Paris, Editions Rieder.
- Hirsch, F** 2005 *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Jolles, A** 2005 'Stalin's Talking Museums'. *Oxford Art Journal*. 28, 3, 430-455, doi:10.1093/oxartj/kci036.
- Kaulen, M E** 2001. *Muzei-khramy i muzei-monastyri v pervoe desiatiletie Sovetskoï vlasti*. [Cathedral and Monastery Museums in the First Decade of Soviet Power]. Moscow, Luch.
- Koutchinsky, S** 2005 'St Petersburg museum of the history of religion in the new millennium'. *Material Religion: the Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*. Vol. 1, Issue 1.

- Martel, R** 1933 *Le Mouvement Antireligieux en URSS (1917-1932)*. Paris, Marcel Rivière.
- Peris, D** 1998 *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Powell, D E** 1975 *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: a Study of Mass Persuasion*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Salmond, W** 2005 'Some Notes on the Experimental Marxist Exhibition'. *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*. Vol. 5 No. 1.
- Sartory, A and Bailly, E** 1935 *Visions Rouges: Souvenirs de Voyages en U.R.S.S., Allemagne, Provinces Baltiques et Pologne*. Paris, J. Peyronnet.
- Struve, N** ca. 1967 *Christians in Contemporary Russia*. London, Harvill Press.
- Thrower, J** 1983 Marxist-Leninist Scientific Atheism and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR. *Religion and Reason* 25. Berlin, Mouton.
- White, W C** 1930 'The Triple-Barred Cross'. *Scribner's Magazine*. Vol LXXXVIII.